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Balloons to war on smugglers of drugs

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MIAMI — Caribbean drug smugglers who were lucky enough in recent weeks not to be stung by Operation Blue Lightning, an unprecedented joint drug-fighting effort by the United States and Bahamas, might soon find themselves detected by several new ship-tethered mobile radar balloons.

The U.S. Coast Guard intends to lease as many as five helium-filled "aerostat" radar balloon devices in the coming months that can detect and monitor small vessel traffic over a 70-mile radius. The aerostats, placed at strategic points in the Caribbean, should increase Coast Guard intelligence about suspect vessel movements and enable the agency to deploy its interdiction resources more effectively.

The Coast Guard is the federal agency primarily responsible for interdiction of maritime drug smuggling, operating 155 ships, 2100 patrol boats and 190 aircraft. But despite the Coast Guard's efforts and that of other law enforcement agencies, only 20 to 30 percent of the narcotic drugs smuggled into the United States is confiscated, said Coast Guard Lt. James R. Simpson of Miami.

These statistics could soon be changing however. Several tests and an evaluation of the aerostat have been completed and the Coast Guard has determined the radar devices well suited for surveillance in the narrow Caribbean "choke-points" along the sea routes favored by traffickers trying to smuggle marijuana and cocaine into the southeastern United States from South and Central America.

According to Lt. Simpson, chief spokesman for the Coast Guard's largest 7th District covering the southeastern United States and Caribbean, 90 percent of the drugs that come from Latin America, especially Colombia, pass through three choke points — the Yucatan Channel

between Mexico and Cuba, the Windward Passage between Cuba and Haiti, and the Mona Passage between the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico.

"The strategy, therefore, that we traditionally use, and have for many years, is a choke-point strategy," said Lt. Simpson. "The Coast Guard maintains surface craft and aircraft patrolling these three areas, the object being if we can catch one mother ship with 40 tons (of drugs), then we don't have to pursue the 40 pick-up boats with one ton (of drugs) each."

But Lt. Simpson is quick to admit that it "only sounds good to say we've sealed these choke points."

"You take a 210-foot vessel and put it in a 120-mile passage, you really haven't sealed it off. In my estimation we're getting only 20 to 30 percent of the drugs coming through," he said.

The 7th Coast Guard District, therefore, looks forward to the arrival of the aerostat balloons to provide not only shore-to-shore coverage of the vital sea lanes, but to serve as a deterrent to smugglers. The Coast Guard determined that the aerostat was able to operate in adverse weather conditions, withstanding hurricane force winds. Also economical, the aerostat will cost about one-tenth as much per hour to operate as a C-130 or E-2C aircraft.

"A radar plane can give you 10 to 12 hours (of surveillance) and then they have to land. A vessel [with aerostat] you can put out there for 30 days at a time and have full-time radar coverage," Lt. Simpson said.

"Right now we have no aerostats. We had one [testing] balloon that was leased and it ran into some bad weather and crashed," the lieutenant added. "But the test project went well enough that we're going to get more of them and start using them."

At present, the Coast Guard is seizing about 2 million pounds of marijuana a year at the three choke points, indicating an estimated 8 million pounds is still getting through. In calendar year 1983, an estimated 115,000 pounds of cocaine were smuggled into the United States, most of it originating in Colombia. With the increased detection provided by the aerostats, the Coast Guard will need to deploy more vessels and aircraft to inspect the additional targets that will be spotted.

Last April in a closed session, the U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control expressed con-

cern that the Coast Guard "does not have the resources required to mount a sustained, aggressive attack against seaborne drug smugglers."

"The Coast Guard is unable now, due to lack of resources, to intercept all suspect smuggling vessels identified through intelligence efforts," the committee said, urging President Reagan and Congress this fiscal year to provide the resources needed for Coast Guard aircraft and vessels.

The costs of aerostat leases and procurements is estimated at \$20 million dollars, or the value of a minor drug bust.